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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that education leaders who would create learner-centered schools should define and understand the prevailing organizational structures and educational processes of their schools and determine whether or not these subsystems support or oppose one another. This report examines the use of a self-assessment, diagnostic tool (the Kite) designed to reveal incongruities between organizational and educational subsystems within high schools. Building from successful implementation in schools in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, the study described in the report examined the efficacy of the Kite process in American schools. Four case studies of schools in the southwest United States are presented. The case studies indicate that in all schools, staff participants were interested and active in assessing their work environment, this in the apparent absence of teacher opportunity to routinely discuss school development. Tension between teachers' desires to teach students as individuals and the top-down requirement for standardization and accountability was commonplace. Based on these findings, the report notes that application of the Kite framework as a diagnostic tool can help a school identify its barriers to concentrated reform efforts by constructing an authentic picture of the school, which can then be measured against the qualities and practices of a learner-centered environment. (Appendix details the Kite components, models, and assessment procedures. Contains 18 references.) (HTH)

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Running Head: ONE STEP TOWARD A LEARNER-CENTERED HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

Education leaders who would create learner-centered schools should define and understand the prevailing organizational structures and educational processes of their schools and determine whether or not these subsystems support or oppose one another. This report examines the use of a self-assessment, diagnostic tool (the Kite) designed to reveal incongruities between organizational and educational subsystems within high schools. Building from successful implementation in schools in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, the present study examines the efficacy of the Kite process in American schools. Four case studies of schools in the southeast U.S. using the Kite are described. In all schools, participants were interested and active in assessing their work environment, this in the apparent absence of teacher opportunity to routinely discuss school development. Tension between teachers' desire to teach students as individuals and the top-down requirement for standardization and accountability was commonplace. Application of the Kite framework as a diagnostic tool can help a school identify its barriers to concentrated reform efforts by constructing an authentic picture of the school, which can then be measured against the qualities and practices of a learner-centered environment.

One Step Toward a Learner-Centered High School

Schools reflecting a learner-centered environment operate very differently from traditional schools (Presidential Task Force, 1993). The primary difference is the assumption that all, rather than some, students learn. The school does not ask if a student can learn, but under what conditions a student will learn. Thus the practice of school is focused on the learner's own knowledge construction and use (Rallis, 1995). Education leaders who would create learner-centered environments are thus advised to use organizational theory and research to make decisions (Fullan, 1991). A first step is for a school to define and understand its prevailing organizational structures and educational processes and determine whether or not these subsystems support or oppose one another.

The purpose of this report is to examine the use of a self-assessment, diagnostic tool (the Kite) designed to reveal incongruities between organizational and educational subsystems within high schools. The goals of this examination relate both to the needs of the school-clients and the writer-consultants. The four schools highlighted in this report sought opportunities to make informed choices about themselves as organizations and their visions for learner-centeredness while the writer-consultants sought feedback to improve their work with other high schools.

In using the Kite, the consultants provided the school-clients with realistic pictures of themselves and their capacity for change within their unique culture and environment. The schools provided the consultants with information that was used to refine the Kite self-assessment process.

Theoretical Framework

This study is supported by two areas of theory and research: (1) learner-centered principles and educational practice, and (2) organizational theory and learning. McCombs and Whisler (1997) characterize schools embracing learner-centered principles as professional communities. The learner-centered school fosters a culture where time for collaborative planning and teacher

involvement in key decisions on school policy is routine (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). In this professional community, organizational learning is prominent. Teachers are seen as experts in their work and school faculties sit together to reflect, plan and decide on how to improve. For these teachers, it is important to share expertise and create knowledge (and use outside expertise) to sustain their practice. Such sharing develops organizational memory and a common understanding which further influences the capacity to learn (Louis, Kruse, & Raywid, 1996).

Teacher commitment appears to be higher in schools characterized by collegiality and professionalism (Riehl & Sipple, 1996). Moreover, a sense of efficacy and community is fostered where teachers know each others' work and are helpful to their colleagues (Newmann, Rutter, & Smith, 1989). These findings support Stiegelbauer's (1994) suggestion that collegial organizations, as contrasted with more hierarchical ones, best facilitate change. She cites themes of shared vision, strategic problem-solving, analysis and restructured organizational norms, adding that these themes are interactive and interwoven throughout the process of change.

Collegiality also contributes to improved relationships between teachers and administrators. In a collegial school, a principal leads from the center of the community rather than working from the top (Lashway, 1996). The collegial principal uses every opportunity to stimulate discussion and reflection and to create networks of conversation that link faculty and staff with teaching and learning (Louis, Kruse, & Raywid, 1996). Newmann, Rutter, and Smith (1989) conclude that administrators' response to teachers is a factor that contributes to the school's sense of efficacy, community and expectations. Site-based management or shared decision making is often seen as a means to close the gap between teachers and administration. Johnson and Pajares (1996) describe the elimination of authoritarianism and isolation where shared decision-making is practiced. They underscore the concept of "deliberative community and an ideal speech situation" which lead to free decision-making. Fullan (1994) summarizes the related literature in calling for coordination of top-down and bottom-up strategies for educational reform.

The Kite Process

The self-assessment process used here fits in the above described importance of creating a professional community. This process is a way to increase the understanding of the school of their educational and organizational situation. It is a developmental framework that links educational systems and practices with the organizational or colloborative effort of a professional community. The possible gap between education and organization, or a difference between stages of development in various parts of one school, are unique to every school and can be the reason for tensions or failure to develop.

When used as a diagnostic procedure the data are plotted in a graph ressembling the shape of a kite. The theoretical base of the Kite addresses the lack of connections between instruction and organizational structures (Meyer, 1975) or the school as a loosely coupled system (Weick, 1976). In this study the use of a diagnostic instrument, including its interactive way of assessment, is related to school development. The self-assessment process can be interwoven in ongoing change efforts--both in educational aspects as well as in colloborative--or it can serve as a start of a change process. The methodology of the Kite process can be seen as "clinical research" (Schein, 1993) in having its starting point in the need or the questions of a client system rather than a research operation only. The goal is to improve the clients' functioning and to gain knowledge about this improvement process. It is also founded in a style called "learning diagnosis" (Beer & Spector, 1993) which promotes active participation and the creation of learning situations rather than survey-like investigations. It enhances active thinking, critical reflection and an ongoing dialogue to clarify the current state of an organization.

Designed in reform-bound Europe, the Kite recognizes the variety in school functioning and honors the develomental aspect of it. We suggest that this framework might apply to American schools as well, considering the existence of wide variation in professional communities between schools as found by Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996). The Kite is a framework which

not only reveals educational and organizational subsystems but which also gives perspective for school change and development.

Experiences and Results in the Netherlands

Results in the Netherlands during the last five years in comprehensive high schools showed that working with the Kite gave people better insight into how their organization functioned. It helped schools that were engaged in educational improvement to keep better on track (Petri, 1995). Schools that did not actually work on educational processes benefited less. In 12 evaluated client-centered case studies, two understandings came out clearly: (1) the extent to which individual teacher autonomy was a restraining factor in developing educational growth and collegial colloboration, and (2) the way a school leader, or leadership team--which in the Netherlands tends to be fairly collegial--were working in quasi-topdown restructuring concepts instead of using the skills and ideas of the staff.

These findings lead in the single school to a better blending of top-down and bottom-up strategies to pursue their educational efforts. The Kite process resulted in school staffs' learning from their weaknesses on both sides to build a stronger and shared cooperation. The Kite process marked a turning point for many school people involved on the level of having insight in the connection between education and organization and on their own role being part of both subsystems. And even if it was not always clear how the organization specifically had changed as a consequence of working with the Kite, people stated learning from the Kite influenced the development of the school during the following year(s). The combination of the structural developmental character of the Kite which gives a framework for thinking in distinguished school models and options to move to a next model and the interaction of the participants (teachers always said they liked the group discussion on their work) testing their school reality is at the base of this change. The results also revealed that the position in the Kite (i.e. what is the current school model) indicates a capacity for development. Schools that were plotted partly or

substantially in the integrated area showed a better ability to use the assessment information for new initiatives and further action. An "integrated" school has overcome the barriers of individual autonomy and top-down restructuring: no longer working against each other but moving on together. The interacting spheres had stopped conflicting with each other and moved the school to a more learner-centered and collaborative school community. Schools that were plotted in the "segmented" area of the Kite were not, or were less, able to use the information of the assessment process and reluctant to carry out the needed and accepted (by participants) steps to change their structures and culture. In this sense a change paradox exists: the more a school needs change the less they are likely to do it!

Method

The Kite process aims at a shared picture of the school based on facts and perceptions of reality by the participants. This is not a total or average of individual opinions but a shared view of practices and current state as expresssed by the school people. Discussion and reflection takes places in small groups, the number of which depends on the size of the school or the proportion of staff involved. Discussions are guided by a set of educational and organizational descriptors that differ to represent four models of schools. The results are plotted in a graph representing the boundaries of school development, one axis indicating a range from a simple and fixed situation to an open and flexible educational environment, and one axis indicating the coordination continuum from mechanistic to organic. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1 about here

The incongruences between organizational structures and educational processes serve as a means for discussion with the participants to enhance understanding of the functioning of the school. The aim is to reach consensus on the "portrait" of the school and to agree on what parts are

strong, weak, or have to be changed. This discussion, primarily based on the Kite outcomes and issues related to them, will serve as a stimulus for change efforts at the high school. Data sources consist of the completed profiles of the Kite instrument plotted in a graph, and consultant observations and interpretations.

Results

The results of a Kite assessment are first of all dependent on the characteristics of the instrument. It has been developed using theory and practice. The bricks of this instrument, the educational and organizational components, and the interactive procedure (see Appendix A), found their origins in the Netherlands and to a lesser degree in Germany in the 1970's and 1980's. They were adapted to the American high school (Petri & Burkhardt, 1992). However, the heart of American education (tracking, testing, staff development, local politics) was not expressed well enough in this version. A revised version based on current educational issues was used in this study and is still being improved through the experience of working with the schools. In the first year one elementary and one high school participated, and then we decided to continue with high and middle schools only. Two high schools participated in the second year. Using fictional school names, our four case studies are discussed below:

Case #1: Apex Elementary School

Background. Apex Elementary was in a process of growth and change because of a local issue: a new group of upper income people planned to live in the upscale residential and commercial area being developed within the school's attendance zone. A "Learning Circle", including district people, educational consultants, business people and university evaluators, was established to improve the functioning of the school. The impetus for conducting the assessment was attributed to the principal and the "Learning Circle" collaborators. The Kite diagnosis was considered one component of the extensive "facelift" that education and business community leaders believed necessary for the role of the school in the new, socially upscale environment

which began surrounding it. The assessment was executed with the whole staff during one full day session; a follow-up was held three months later with the leadership team, and a concluding conversation with the principal took place one week after that.

Outcomes. The school showed a mix of two educational models: mixed ability on one hand and selective streaming on the other hand. The tension between the view of the school as adapting to learner needs on the one hand, and the demand for rigid testing on the other, became apparent. The organizational model was not so clear; somehow the teachers functioned as if in a simple structure but viewed themselves as working in an integrative way. In conjunction with a collegial climate, including the principal, it showed a picture of an organization not responding to the inherent conflict (tests versus student) in their education. Teachers felt there were too many outside demands but realized in doing the diagnosis how much they already had accomplished. The principal acknowledged the gap between education and organization and her role in eliminating it. She decided to stand up when necessary to clarify external requirements and to take actions to support teachers and to convince other teachers to join the internal development. The principal thought the Kite proces was useful as an overall "thermometer" to measure school development.

Case #2. Platform High School

Background. Platform High School was situated in a rural area and populated by nearly 400 students and 28 staff. The impetus for conducting the diagnosis was attributed to the principal's concern about the state's identifying the school as "low performing". The assessment process took two afternoons with a group of eight teachers and the principal with a follow-up two months later. The discussion on their education was felt as very useful and participants wanted to involve the whole staff in thinking about the school and how to improve practices.

Outcomes. The educational model showed a strong focus on tracks and testing but teachers felt a more individual approach would be necessary. The view of the student was contradictory to their practice. The organizational model revealed an emphasis on collegial communication but co-existed with a strong tendency to work alone with little need for professional development. Overall coordination was lacking due to different views on cooperation and to the limited managerial role of the principal. The role of the district, with heavy demands on testing, promoted a sense of togetherness in the school; the capacity to bring it into practice, however, was lacking. In the follow-up meeting the informal character of school organization was highlighted as a barrier to involve the staff in developing new visions and practices, while the individual involvement of teachers with their students was ranked as high. In a conversation with the principal a year later, it appeared that no consequent actions were taken.

Case #3. Eastern High School

Background. The second year an improved version of the instrument was used and the procedure emphasized the planning of the process in the school and the selection of participants more thoroughly. An orientation for interested schools was held at the SERVE office and, as a consequence, two high schools enrolled in the process. One participating high school, Eastern, was situated in a suburban area close to its feeder elementary and middle schools. The school was populated by 960 students and 61 teachers, about 25% of whom possessed graduate degrees. The impetus for conducting the diagnosis was attributed to the principal. She was reported to be "interested in anything that might improve teaching and learning." Twelve faculty members were selected by the principal; the assistant principal participated, too. It became clear that the Kite process was unclear to most participating staff; expectations had little reference to school-wide concerns.

Outcomes. The data revealed a combination of two educational models: streaming and tracking to fit the outside requirements, and mixed ability to match students' needs and abilities. So teachers managed to work in a semi-individualized way within the tracking and testing framework. The organizational model was more diverse: external requirement caused a line-and-staff model with an accent on subject departments; a collegial and cooperative climate was also revealed, and the vision orientation of the principal emphasized staff development and team responsibility. The tension in the organization was oweing to the presence of teachers who still worked autonomously. The bureaucratic structures was "harmless" to them while the principal seemed too much concerned with external relations and with the future. A functional liasion was needed to close the gap between the two teacher "groups", a role that the assistant principal, as acting instructional leader, could well perform. In the follow-up, most Kite group members and the principal were present. The group had already informed the full staff and the conclusions of the diagnosis were well-received. The tension between external guidelines and internal adjustments due to student's learning were discussed and given priority. The assistant principal reaction was that the Kite finally clarified what had heretofore been a problem without a name; the Kite has pursuaded him to begin linking the school's organizational structures with its educational processes.

Case #4. Circle High School

Background. Circle High School was located in a residential neighborhood near one of the district's middle schools and housed 930 students and 52 staff. One faculty member received information about the Kite diagnosis and arranged the session. A desire to improve was stated, but given the "revolving door" leadership over the last years, one might assume that a desire for an informed and capable faculty prompted the call for self-assessment. Eight volunteer members participated during two workdays in August. They reported the diagnosis as intellectually

challenging and collegially satisfying. The need for a follow up in the school was expressed but that the new principal should be informed first before taking further actions.

Outcomes. Tracking emerged as the prevailing model but was deemed contradictory to most teachers' view of students. Similarly, the didactic approach and the use of materials of many teachers was at odds with their professed learner-centered philosophy. The organizational model showed a traditional segmented and hierarchical structure with exceptions in communication in some teacher groups. Tension existed between two groups of teachers, one more test-directed and working autonomously, and the other more student learning directed and communicating with each other. A hierarchical structure cannot bridge this gap: therefore one needs more personal actions on the side of the leadership and on the side of the teachers. In this volunteer Kite group, the possibility was raised of having brought in too much wishful thinking because the participants enjoy cooperating with collegeaues. But probably it is not the spirit in the school. It made it harder to think of a school-wide development but nevertheless the initiative to interest the principal was taken.

Discussion

In all four case studies one can observe the participants being interested and active in assessing their work environment. It appeared less common, however, for teachers and administrators to discuss school-wide matters and development (except for the elementary school that was in the middle of a long-term development). In all cases the tension between top-down and bottom-up initiatives, or conserving behavior, was apparent. And only in the cases where the principal (or assistant principal) took responsibility were further actions based on the diagnosis undertaken. When leadership was exerted, a better understanding and acceptance of the self-assessment by the staff resulted. On another level, it showed the differences, diversity, and unexpected paths of progresss in a particular school. As self-assessment is only the beginning of school development, one can expect even greater diversity as the process continues.

Beleaguered both by mandates for change and initiatives purporting to accomplish it, schools often fail to take a necessary first-step—examining themselves as organizations. Application of the Kite framework as a diagnostic tool can help a school identify its barriers to concentrated reform efforts by constructing an authentic picture of the school, which can then be measured against the qualities and practices of a learner-centered environment. The findings from this study of collaborative efforts a regional educational laboratory and high schools intent on reform can serve to inform similar efforts nationwide.

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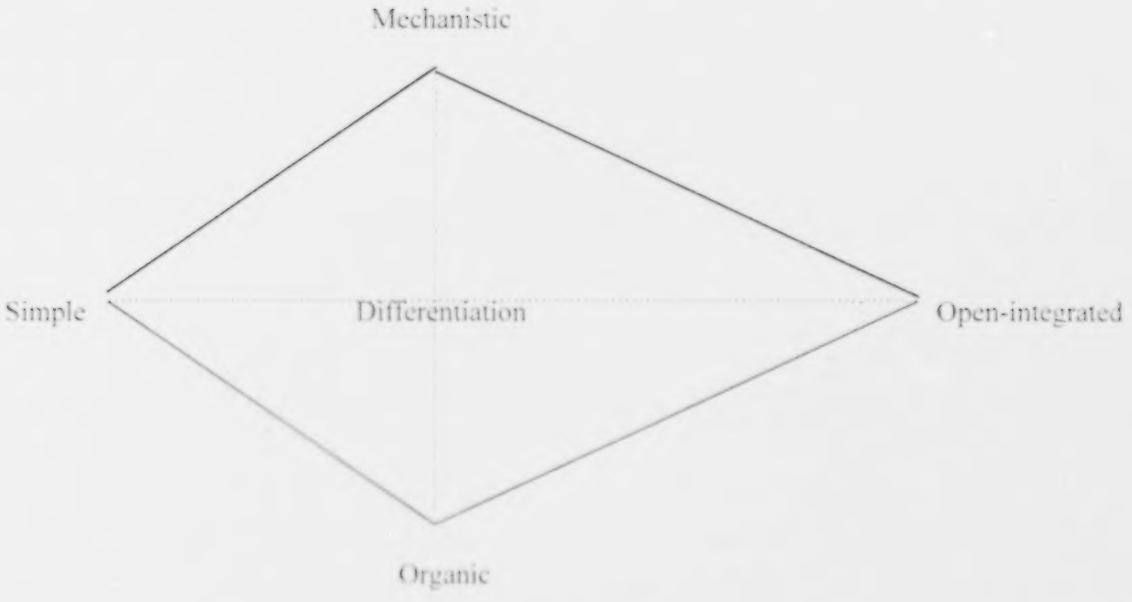
Figure 1. The Kite



Appendix A

Kite Components, Models, and Assessment Procedures

In the Kite there are four models for the educational subsystem and four models for the organizational subsystem of a school. On the horizontal axis, Model I represents a subject-based, selective school with a simple, segmented organizational structure; and Model IV represents an open learning environment with a complex integrated organizational structure. On the vertical axis, Model II represents a well defined tracking (setting) configuration based on core subjects with a mechanistic organizational structure, and Model III represents a mixed ability pattern of education with an organic, highly communicative school organization. (See Figure 1.) The four school models represent prototypical situations. In reality, schools may differ in many respects from their prototypical positions and many schools may be found situated in between two or more models or scattered within the kite.

There is a strong relationship between educational and organizational models, and theoretically, they should be congruent. For example, a simple educational process (teaching for tests) needs minimal coordination and cooperation among the staff. However, a complex educational process (themes, cooperative learning) needs a lot of communication and cooperation among the staff. Without these organizational processes this educational model could not be executed. And vice verse, such an organizational model would be superfluous and redundant in a simple educational process.

Components

The components are the bricks of the models. There are separate components for the educational and organizational models. Each component has a different value in each model as the following examples show:

Model Components	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
B.1 Focus of the curriculum	cognitive in all subjects	cognitive in all different ability levels	same as II plus the pace and levels differ	cognitive, affective, normative, expressive aimed at the student and on group process
5. Amount of Teacher Autonomy	full individual autonomy in the classroom	limited by guidelines and hierarchy	constrained by subject department guidelines	limited by modular teacher teams

A comprehensive description of any of the four school models is obtained when the values for all the components related to that specific model are considered together. These comprehensive images are the prototypical school models. However, in reality, a school may display component values that are related to more than one model and these discrepancies provide the unique image of that school. The components of the educational models have eight main components, each with several subcomponents:

A. View of the student

B. General focus and structure of the curriculum

C. Grouping patterns

D. Organization of learning

E. Learning routes

F. Student guidance

G. Testing and reporting

H. Evaluation of teaching and instructional processes.

The components of the organizational model constitute the social subsystem where formal relations, information flow, and decision making are performed. The organizational models are defined by eleven components, with multiple subcomponents:

1.0 Organizing principle

2.0 Subject department

3.0 Guidance organization

4.0 Professional development

5.0 Teacher autonomy

6.0 Coordinating mechanism

7.0 Decision making and communication

8.0 Principal and middle management

9.0 Regulations and superintendent

10.0 Community involvement

11.0 School as organization

Models

It goes beyond this summary to describe the four models extensively. Here are some characteristics (* for education, ** for organization) with a special focus on guidance.

Model I Selective - Segmental

- Class consists of diverse ability levels, so groups are heterogeneous but ability ignored
- There is uniform, whole-class instruction, so the class is treated as a homogeneous group
- Guidance is random
- The teacher works alone
- Teacher-based organization
- Principal shows now apparent leadership.

Model II Tracks - Line and Staff

- Homogeneous groups that recognize ability levels or sets (tracks within tracks)
- Instruction based on levels or sets
- Guidance helps placement
- Tests per level
- Principal makes decisions: is a manager
- Well structured meetings plus consultations

Model III Mixed ability - Collegial

- Teachers have some ownership over content
- Teacher are connected with students, stays longer with students
- Recognition of mixed ability by regrouping within a class
- Decision making is based on consent in a team
- Principal is member of a team: first among equals
- High information level of all members

Model IV Innovative - learning team

- The content is student based
- Real world curriculum

- Cooperative and independent learning
- Team work
- Site based decision making
- Vision-based strategies

The Assessment Process

During the assessment process all of the staff or a designated staff team discuss the educational and organizational components. For each component the staff select from the four descriptions provided, the one which most closely describes the situation of their school. Data collection is a group activity; reaching consensus on a description for each component is vital to the process.

Once the school's portrayal is developed and plotted on the Kite a discrepancy analysis is performed by a facilitator. It shows a picture of one or more models often with mismatches or contradictions. They are discussed, elaborated and finalized by the schoolteam. This discussion can be done in one afternoon with the facilitator's help or can be a longer if the whole staff is involved. A facilitator is strongly recommended but the process remains in the hands of school personel. The expertise and skills of the facilitator are critical. The facilitator must bring knowledge beyond that of staff, and have skills of questioning, coaching and mentoring to help staff uncover and identify their current state in a non-judgemental way. For the improvement process to take place discrepancies must be acknowledged without blame or consequence being feared. However, confrontation is a useful tension in the process--confrontation of what people think or want, of definitions, values, standards etc.--to reach consensus on an accurate portrayal of the school.

The interactiveness is a key feature of the Kite assessment process. Staff collect data, staff must understand the components in order to make decisions. It requires discussion, reflection and interaction which contribute to the quality of decisions. The process takes the form of "mini-

research" lead by the facilitator with the committed involvement of the school. The theory behind the Kite serves as a mirror of the practice of the school but is not exclusive: situational factors can be brought in by the participants which will make the analysis more comprehensive.